

Battle Captain Revisited

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Battle Captain Revisited

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The Marine Corps has employed a position known as the "battle captain" within its combat operations centers (COC). However, the position does not appear on any table of organization (T/O)¹, and no training is currently available to prepare the Marines for the billet. To employ a "battle captain" billet effectively in a combat operations center the Marine Corps must reach consensus about its duties and employment and develop a supportive training curriculum.

Background

The term battle captain as it applies to the current employment can be found in literature as early as 1985 in the Army Field Circular (FC) 71-6, Battalion and Brigade Command and Control and then later in the 1995 Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) Newsletter No. 95-7, Tactical Operations Center (TOC).² Both works identified the importance of a single person in an operations center who tracked battlefield progress and managed the information flow. In fact, the latter work actually called this person the "battle captain." Since then, the Army has accepted the concept and standardized training and manuals for the employment of their battle captains, and employs them

¹ A table of organization is a table listing the number and duties of personnel and the major items of equipment authorized for a military unit

² Richard L. Wampler, James Centric, Margaret S. Salter, "The Brigade Battle Captain- A Prototype Training Product," U.S Army Research Institute, June 1998 <<https://www.infantry.army.mil/arifb/Research/Report%20Summary/1998/The%20Brigade%20Battle%20Captain.html>> (27 September 2005).

widely in brigades and smaller tactical operations centers (TOC). By standardizing the concept and training, the Army has a consistent description and expectation of the responsibilities of a battle captain. Despite the fact that continuous refinement and improvements are being made to the concept, the Army is significantly further along in the training and employment of their battle captains than the Marine Corps is.

The USMC also recognized the need to fuse responsibilities of the watch officer with the increasingly significant responsibilities of the information manager within the COC and generally accepted the battle captain concept and definition from the Army. However, the Marine Corps has been attempting to evolve the concept into one more suitable for the Corps. Because of this, the responsibilities and employment techniques of the battle captain concept differ from one combat operations center to another, which hinders the standardization of the billet.

Battle Captain Defined

To develop a battle captain training program the Marine Corps must first agree upon a definition of the term. The two most commonly accepted definitions are found in *MCRP 5-12 Operational Terms and Graphics* and in the instruction at the Marine Corps' Expeditionary Warfare School. The definitions differ slightly in language, but significantly in meaning.

MCRP 5-12A Operational Terms and Graphics defines a battle captain as:

the shift officer in charge within a command post associated by position and not rank. The battle captain is located in the operations section of a command post and oversees the conduct of command post operations during his shift. The battle captain ensures that relevant information is given to decision makers and works closely with all members of the command group and staff.³

This very generic definition of the term focuses on the two major components of the concept, the watch officer and the information manager. By this definition, a conclusion can be drawn that a battle captain facilitates decisionmaking but is not, in fact, a decisionmaker. This is the main difference between the two definitions.

The Expeditionary Warfare School defines the battle captain as

a command post technique that assigns many duties and responsibilities traditionally associated with the information management officer and senior watch officer under a single, experienced officer; the purpose of the battle captain billet is to ensure the command post functions in a manner that supports the command and control needs of the commander throughout the planning, decision, execution and assessment (PDE&A) cycle.⁴

³ Headquarters Department of the Army, Operational Terms and Graphics, 2004. Washington D.C.: 2004, 1-19.

⁴ Expeditionary Warfare School, EWS Battle Captain Primer, 2005. Quantico, VA: 2005, 1.

The EWS instruction expounds upon the definition as follows:

"Certain decision-making authorities are delegated to the battle captain as they can recognize patterns, analyze information, and distinguish routine from critical decisions."⁵ The added "decision-making authorities" portion of the description goes beyond the scope of the doctrinal definition but is vague in terms of defining the decisionmaking role of the battle captain.

In order to provide a common reference point, the doctrinal (MCRP 5-12A) definition of the term battle captain will be used for the purpose of this paper.

Duties

To standardize the billet there needs to be a common understanding of what duties a battle captain is expected to perform. Although there may not be total agreement on the definition of a battle captain, there is a general consensus that the responsibilities of the senior watch officer and information manager must be encompassed in the billet.

Simply stated, a senior watch officer must ensure the smooth operation of the COC during his or her shift. He or she is in charge of synchronizing the efforts of representatives from the separate staff sections (operations, logistics, intelligence, fires, etc.) to allow for a common tactical

⁵ Battle Captain Primer, 3.

picture⁶ and monitoring progress towards mission accomplishment. The senior watch officer must ensure that the operations center functions properly to provide continuity between shifts and maintain momentum during operations. To do this, the flow of information entering, getting processed, and exiting the COC must be effectively managed.

The information manager supervises the information flow within the COC and ensures the situational awareness of the commander and primary staff. He must coordinate procedures necessary to share quality information generated by the staff and promote the development and exchange of knowledge required by the commander to make decisions.⁷

As a starting point, the Marine Corps can look to the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) Newsletter No. 95-7 to spell out duties for a battle captain. Although not all encompassing, the Army does a good job at providing specific guidance for the role of their battle captain operating in tactical operations centers.

Battle Captain: The role of the battle captain is similar to that of the XO. The battle captain assists the XO in synchronizing and coordinating the staff's effort. The distinction between the two individuals lies in their level of experience. During the battle, synchronizing and coordinating the staff is normally best served by the XO.

⁶ **Common tactical picture** (CTP)- refers to the current depiction of the battlespace for a single operation within an area of responsibility.

⁷ United States Marine Corps, MCWP 3-40.2 Information Management, 2002 (Washington D.C.: HQMC, 2002), 2-2.

During the preparation phase, the battle captain can normally fulfill these duties. Experience at the CTCs shows that during the battle, the battle captain should focus his efforts on supervising the soldiers within the S3 operations cell, rather than synchronizing the efforts of other staff members. Additional duties of the battle captain include:

- **Supervising the efforts of staff NCO's within the S3 section.**
- **Conducting analysis and assessment of available information.**
- **Assisting in the review and dissemination of information within the TOC.**
- **Assisting in monitoring the location and activities of friendly units.**
- **Serving as the TOC OIC during the absence of field grade officers.**
- **Assisting the S3 during the TDMP.⁸**

Additional guidance can be drawn from the MCWP 5-12A definition of "battle captain" in which the role is delineated as a facilitator to prevent the battle captain from veering into the commander's realm with tasking authority (unless otherwise dictated by the commander). Regardless of the definition, the commander of the unit will always retain the ability to empower his Marines based on his confidence in and experience with the individual.

Employment

Until there is an official T/O billet for a battle captain there will always be the requirement to source the role/function internally. If the Marine is internally sourced, he/she will

⁸ Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) Newsletter No. 95-7, Tactical Operations Center (TOC), 1995 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: TRADOC, 1995), 8.

have to be professionally developed through the ranks to build credibility with the unit and the commander. Ideally he/she would have experience and training operating in a COC and also have an understanding of fire support coordination and maneuver operations to facilitate his/her situational awareness and decisionmaking abilities.

At the battalion level there are three individuals who have the experience, knowledge and ability to carry out the responsibilities of the battle captain: The assistant operations officer, assistant fire support coordinator, and assistant intelligence officer. What these individuals will lack is the knowledge gained through previous experience. For example, a battle captain with operational experience is better equipped to anticipate a commander's needs and have a better understanding of the situation. On a battalion staff, a battle captain would ideally be a prior company commander with established credibility in the unit.

An exception to the internally sourced billet may be a staff augment from higher headquarters. While the Marine may lack the credibility in the unit, he would still be required to meet the other requisites before being assigned the billet.

In all of the options, the battle captain will have varying tactical COC experience. In order to mitigate this

inexperience, a basic training package must be implemented to prepare the Marine for the billet.

Training

With the current operational tempo as high as it is there may be little time to devote to training battle captains specifically. With that said there is a necessity to prepare the Marine for the position instead of setting him up for failure. To pare down the training to a minimum and still produce favorable returns, the training needs to be focused in specific areas: communication and network operating systems (as it applies to the "common tactical picture"), the Marine Corps Planning Process, information management, and battle drills.

Due to the technological dependence of most COCs, training in communication and network operating systems is necessary for the battle captain to create a common tactical picture for the commander. He or she must be familiar with all the systems to ensure they are being used correctly and efficiently to increase the situational awareness of all involved.

Having a solid background in the Marine Corps Planning Process will aid the battle captain in understanding how tools he may use, such as the decision support matrix, are created. This will also allow him to participate in operational planning

teams and will increase his awareness to situations with which he may be associated with.

Most Marines are not trained in information management and although most Expeditionary Warfare School graduates receive the designation, they will have not operated in a COC as an information manager. Specific training is needed in information management as it applies to techniques and procedures within a combat operations center.

Finally, battle drill training is arguably more valuable than the other training discussed. Through scenario-based training the battle captain can rehearse the procedures that need to be taken to respond to probable situations. This will also provide him with the needed experience operating in a COC and working with a staff.

All of the training can be integrated with the current pre-deployment training packages so as not to take away from other training. However any training would be an improvement over the training currently provided.

Conclusion

The battle captain is an integral position within a combat operations center and can play a major role in the effectiveness and efficiency of the COC. In order to employ the position consistently within the Marine Corps, the organization must

agree on a baseline definition and expectation of the position. The doctrinal definition lends itself to this end, but because of the infancy of the concept many Marine Corps units have taken freedom in defining and employing the position.

Moreover, no Marine Corps "battle captain" training program currently exists. For the Marine Corps to have universal "buy in" for and employment of the battle captain concept, it must improve the way it selects, trains, and employs its battle captains.

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